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## Re/Deconstructing the Rimbaud Myth: Kerouac and Mallarmé

### Introduction

Through a comparative analysis of two short works devoted to Arthur Rimbaud by fellow poets and writers – Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's prose study 'Arthur Rimbaud' (1896), and Beat poet and author Jack Kerouac's versified poem 'Rimbaud' (1960) – this article seeks to shed new light on a long-standing critical debate, first raised by eminent Rimbaud specialist René Étiemble in the early 1950s: namely, how to objectively disentangle this famous poet's life and work from the subjective myths that threaten to engulf them. The article first retraces how the two most dominant and antithetical of these myths to emerge in the late nineteenth century – that of Rimbaud as bohemian 'rebel-artist' versus Rimbaud the Catholic convert –, has each, from opposing moral perspectives, led to his reductive eulogisation: the 'rebel' myth has tended to attract subversive, counter-cultural writers, artists and musicians who enthusiastically identify Rimbaud as a kindred spirit, whereas the Catholic myth has invariably appealed to more conservatively-minded critics who wish to reclaim him as a wayward genius who found belated spiritual redemption in God. Since the 1960s it is the 'rebel myth' that has exerted the stronger influence, not least because it has more recently been reinforced by the related myth of Rimbaud as 'gay icon' (Ivry: 1998). Of those well-intentioned critics who have sought to stem the tide of Rimbaud mythologisations, many have disappointingly succumbed to the opposite prejudice: namely, that of branding him as a failure, who never truly fulfilled his early literary promise.

Accordingly, the second part of the article examines whether or not Kerouac's poem 'Rimbaud' (1960) has proved any more successful than these critical attempts at debunking the Rimbaud myths. It argues that, overall it has not, for two reasons: first, because of Kerouac's propensity for excessive self-identification with Rimbaud via the two dominant myths outlined above, and, secondly, owing to his reductively hetero-normative view of the poet, which is insufficiently nuanced to pose a credible challenge to his more recent mythologisation as gay icon. Kerouac's over-identification with Rimbaud can be attributed to certain obvious biographical affinities between the two men, specifically a shared inner conflict between on the one hand a thirst for freedom, anti-authoritarianism and scandal, and on the other, a repressive Catholicism that is inextricably linked to their strict upbringing by domineering mothers. It can also, paradoxically, be explained by their shared experience of mythologisation itself, since both men were transformed into cultural icons in their own lifetimes, although Kerouac, as arguably the central figure in the Beat movement, registered the impact of his fame far more directly than Rimbaud, who died just as news of his celebrity was beginning to filter through.

In contrast to Kerouac's poem, the third part of the article proposes Mallarmé's earlier, more thoughtful prose piece as an attempt, over half a century before Étiemble's thesis, to demythologise Rimbaud, a demythologisation that is predicated on Mallarmé's deliberate cultivation of alterity, rather than sameness. Where Kerouac seeks out similarities with Rimbaud, Mallarmé emphasises his *differences* from him, thereby affording him the critical distance needed not only to evaluate him objectively, but also to sharpen his own identity as a poet. I conclude by suggesting that despite a few biographical lacunae and unwarranted veiled criticisms, Mallarmé's text presciently prefigures Étiemble's warning that the various mythologisations of Rimbaud severely undermine an accurate assessment of his literary contribution. By debunking the specific myths surrounding Rimbaud, Mallarmé's text also more broadly offers us a prescient aperçu of the dangers of our modern-day celebrity culture, in which the famous struggle to retain ownership of their individual reputations and identities.

### The Origins of the Rimbaud Myth

In his magisterial thesis, Étiemble categorises the myths surrounding Rimbaud according to two types: the first, which is my primary concern here, refers to myth in the general sense of an error, collective lie or illusion 'a fable disproving or controverting the truth'; the second, which I shall

mention only briefly, means myth in the 'fuller sense of legend in its relationship with the supernatural and involving some kind of rite' (see Fowlie, pp. 76-77). This latter type can be seen in some twenty authors who have spoken of Rimbaud in terms of the 'myth of Satan', and the two Surrealists Vaché and Rigaut who initiated the sacrament of suicide in his name (Fowlie, p. 77). The overriding reason behind the profusion of both these types of myth, as Wallace Fowlie pertinently notes, is the extreme difficulty of approaching Rimbaud with impartiality, because: 'attraction to this young rebel is so strong that readers of every age, young and old tend to praise him and explain him in hyperbolic terms.' (p. 11)

Among the first to feel this attraction were two of his most fervent admirers and earliest 'mythologisers' (according to Étiemble's first definition): his former lover and fellow poet Paul Verlaine, and the biographer and critic Paterne Berrichon, who married Rimbaud's beloved sister Isabelle shortly after his death. Each man presented completely contrasting, though equally compelling versions of the poet: Verlaine, that of the accursed poet, or 'poète maudit', and Berrichon the Catholic convert. On balance, literary history has judged Verlaine and his 'version' of Rimbaud far more favourably than Berrichon. For while it is true that his short-lived, but intense homosexual love affair with the teenage Arthur was an affront to the prevailing bourgeois Catholic morality of the time, their tempestuous, bohemian lifestyle in Paris and London infamously culminating in Verlaine's shooting of Rimbaud in Brussels and subsequent imprisonment for two years, most people, especially in the more liberal artistic milieu they frequented, still blamed the younger rather than the older poet for this incident. Even though it was Verlaine, and not Rimbaud, who fired the gun and callously abandoned his wife and child, it was he who gained the greater sympathy (Starkie, p. 265; Robb, p. 237; Lefrère, p. 642). The reason for this was simple: Rimbaud's precocious literary gifts notwithstanding, he had already earned himself, prior to the shooting, a 'scandalous' reputation among his peers as a threatening, corrupting influence, whose offensive, sometimes violent behaviour had made him deeply unpopular among many in the Parisian literary circles to which Verlaine had first introduced him. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that these very same circles were quick to close ranks when the 'enfant prodige' returned to the capital in 1875. For Enid Starkie, Rimbaud's much-debated decision to abandon poetry so young is a direct consequence of his wounded pride at this ostracisation, which also resulted in the cold reception given to *Une Saison en enfer*, a collection for which he had nurtured high hopes (Starkie, p. 269). Be that as it may, in 1884, with his publication of *Les Poètes maudits* Verlaine was able to undo some of the damage for which he himself had partly been responsible. Despite exhibiting that tendency to distort or exaggerate the truth which Étiemble attributes to all the Rimbaud mythologisers (for instance he strategically glosses over the notorious 'scandal'), not to mention a probable degree of self-promotion designed to revive his own flagging career, Verlaine's study was instrumental in reviving Rimbaud's reputation by portraying him as a misunderstood 'accursed' genius. For better or worse, then, Rimbaud's rehabilitation owes much to the older poet, not only because of *Les Poètes maudits*, but also as a result of Verlaine's concerted efforts to rescue his former lover's poetry, especially *Les Illuminations*, from obscurity, at a time when the scandalous nature of Rimbaud's life had completely overshadowed his literary endeavours (Robb, pp. 288, 367-8).

By contrast, posterity has - and not without good reason- been far harsher in its judgement of Paterne Berrichon, the propagator of the second, and more blatantly fabricated Rimbaud myth: that of the Catholic poet who underwent a deathbed conversion (see Robb, pp. 386-7). Lefrère's recent authoritative biography of Rimbaud, for instance, is unsparing in its condemnation of Berrichon: he is presented as an opportunist whose idolisation of the poet and eagerness to gain access to his papers were the principal motivations behind his decision to marry Arthur's sister Isabelle, despite not having even met her (Lefrère, p. 1186). With Isabelle's collusion, Berrichon's biography deliberately doctored and 'spiced up' over a hundred of Rimbaud's letters to make them more literary, exaggerated the financial success of his commercial ventures in Africa, toned down the 'scandalous' homosexual relationship with

Verlaine, aggressively blocked the publication of rival and more reliable biographers Charles Houin and Jean Bourguignon (Lefrère, p. 1190) and perhaps, most controversially of all, steadfastly maintained that Arthur underwent a death-bed conversion to Catholicism, a view later reinforced by the writer and poet Paul Claudel. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century, that the Berrichon version of the morally redeemed Rimbaud began to be superseded by its very opposite: namely, that of Rimbaud as anti-authoritarian rebel artist, a variant of Verlaine's original myth of the 'poète maudit'. It is scarcely surprising that Rimbaud's subversive precociousness, rejection of bourgeois convention and taste for freedom spoke directly to the countercultural youth movement of the 1960s, which comprised such important and innovative song-writers as Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan (Fowle, pp. 7, 18). Nor is it surprising that the myth of the rebel artist should more recently have morphed into that of the gay icon, Rimbaud's 'transgressive' homosexuality and resistance to all forms of authority being seen as key inspirations to subsequent gay writers and activists.

However noble their intentions, then, the propagators of these Rimbaud myths – as 'poète maudit', Catholic convert, rebel artist and gay icon-, have in many respects done his reputation more harm than good by allowing his life – or rather particular versions of it- to overshadow his work, thereby detracting from a more nuanced and objective appreciation of his poetry. Yet paradoxically, even those equally well-meaning critics seeking to dismantle and question these myths have themselves succumbed to the very opposite prejudice: namely, that of confining their evaluation of Rimbaud to his poetry and dismissing his post-literary life in Africa as a regrettable historical footnote. The first of his English-speaking biographers, Enid Starkie, was instrumental in categorising this post-poetic life as an abject failure, though she at least saw the need to take this phase of his existence seriously. Yves Bonnefoy, however, could not even bring himself to discuss it, considering the later 'African Rimbaud' who no longer wrote poetry to be a Rimbaud unworthy of discussion: 'Je trouve indécent qu'on s'acharne à suivre les traces de qui a fait retour à l'existence anonyme. Ne lisons pas les lettres de Rimbaud africain à sa famille; ne cherchons pas à savoir si celui qui voulut un jour *voler le feu* a vendu ceci plutôt que cela' (Bonnefoy, p. 239). So both the Rimbaud mythologisers who sensationalise or even fabricate various aspects of his life and personality and the poet's 'demystifiers' whose intellectual snobbery precludes consideration of his *non*-literary endeavours, are equally guilty of perpetuating an inaccurate and incomplete picture of Rimbaud.

More recently, Robb and Lefrère have gone some way towards redressing this imbalance by claiming that Rimbaud's post-poetic career organically emerged from, rather than in opposition to, his literary one. Robb, for instance, convincingly argues that Rimbaud's poetic taste for 'l'inconnu' is of a piece with his bold and pioneering geographical explorations in the 'Scramble for Africa'. I argue that Mallarmé, too, suggests a continuity rather than discontinuity between the literary and post-literary Rimbaud. First, though, let us turn to Jack Kerouac, whose poetic homage to Rimbaud can be seen to have colluded with, rather than challenged the various Rimbaud myths.

### **Kerouac: Self-identification via the Rimbaud Myth**

Kerouac's poem 'Rimbaud', published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in *City Lights* in 1960, has largely been overlooked and dismissed by critics, including the doyenne of Kerouac scholars Ann Charters, who merely refers to the author's youthful enthusiasm for Rimbaud as a passing phase that fuelled his early literary discussions with fellow Beat writer and poet Allen Ginsberg when they first became friends at Columbia in New York in 1944 (Charters, p. 80). Marjorie Perloff, one of the few scholars even to mention the poem, nevertheless regards Kerouac's 'versified biography' as inferior to the 'more interesting "homages"' to be found in slightly later prose poems: Jack Spicer's *Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud* (1962), Gilbert Sorrentino's *Splendide Hotel*, (1973) and Keith Abbott's *Book of Rimbaud*, (1977), (see, Perloff, p. 6). The one critic to have devoted serious attention to the poem, Warren French, nuances the 'self-

identification thesis', by arguing that Kerouac projected onto Rimbaud's 'loss' of Verlaine his own heartbreak at losing his close childhood friend Sebastien Sampa, who was killed during the Second World War, and whose sister, Stella, he was later to marry (French, pp. 121-4). In support of his thesis French cites the nostalgic reference made by Kerouac to Sampa in his posthumously published novel *Visions of Cody* (1972), a story based on his closest mature male relationships: namely, Neal Cassady and Allen Ginsberg: 'like Rimbaud and his Verlaine, every rose's got a summer, Julien and his Dave, I had my Sebastian: Julien's Verlaine was murdered, my Verlaine was killed in a battle of war, Cody's Verlaine though is Irwin- or was.' If Cody and Irwin are thinly veiled references to Ginsberg and Cassady, who had a homosexual affair until Cassady tired of it, Julien is the alter ego of Lucien Carr, Kerouac's friend at Columbia who had murdered David Kammerer, a former teacher who had attempted to force a homosexual relationship on an unwilling Carr. French concludes that the three comparisons that Kerouac introduces in *Visions of Cody* to his own relationship with Sebastian 'all refer to aggressively homosexual pursuers of unwilling or unenthusiastic young men.' Thus Kerouac 'must have realized' that his elaborate handling of the Rimbaud/Verlaine analogy in *Visions of Cody* implied a more subtle homoerotic element in his relationship with Sebastian, a relationship that he coveted but was never able to regain with his male friendships in later life, not even Neal Cassady.

Whether or not Kerouac's close friendship with Sampa influences this poem quite as much as French suggests, his overall argument that Rimbaud's relationship with Verlaine offers the Beat author the ideal window into his own conflicted feelings about homosexuality has considerable merit<sup>1</sup>: as we shall see, the first half of the poem depicts Rimbaud as a largely passive, 'irresponsible' homosexual in thrall to the older Verlaine, whereas the second half portrays a more 'active', responsible heterosexual who is relieved to leave Verlaine and his homosexual past behind. In what follows, I propose an extension of French's 'psycho-sexual identification' thesis: quite apart from tackling the crucial question of sexuality, Kerouac's poem, like fellow Rimbaud admirer Henry Miller's critical study *The Time of the Assassins*, betrays an underlying desire to identify with Rimbaud as a kindred spirit. Kerouac finds ample sustenance and justification for his self-identification in two sources: first, in those biographical similarities between him and the French poet, and, secondly, in the two dominant myths – the rebel artist and the Catholic convert- that surround him. But this self-identification comes at a price: that of colluding in the subjective mythologisation of Rimbaud, rather than advancing our objective appreciation of his contribution to literature.

That Kerouac should have been attracted to Rimbaud on a purely biographical level is scarcely surprising, given certain striking similarities in the two men's formative years: both were raised in devout Catholic households by domineering mothers on a strict diet of 'tough love'; fathers were either absent or distant: Le capitaine Rimbaud abandoned his family when Arthur was just six, and although Jack did have a relationship with his father, by all accounts it was not without friction: Leo Kerouac was a compulsive gambler who disapproved of his son's literary ambitions (Dittman, p.7, Nicosia, p. 102). What is more, much ink has been spilled by critics and biographers on both men's lifelong inability to sever the umbilical cord, despite their constant attraction to a vagabond existence. However much he cut off his ties with Europe during his peripatetic life as trader and explorer in Abyssinia, Rimbaud was inexorably drawn back, if not always in person, then via his frequent correspondence, to his mother's farmhouse at Roche; Jack, too, spent much of his adulthood living with his mother in Massachusetts or

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<sup>1</sup> That Kerouac may have been bisexual is also a view supported by Josée Yvon, who argues that he had several homosexual encounters, even if the bulk of his sexual experiences were with women; see 'Slab bacon Comme à Lowell ou les Tendances Sexuelles de Jack Kerouac' in *Un Homme Grand: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroads of Many Cultures*, ed. Pierre Anctil et al. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990), pp. 171-2.

Florida, which contrasted with his more 'hell-raising' literary lifestyle in New York.<sup>2</sup> This hell-raising is a feature of both men's lives: Rimbaud's bohemian drunkenness and riotous behaviour with Verlaine in Paris and London was later to be repeated –albeit in a more irreversibly self-destructive guise– by Kerouac in New York once he descended inexorably into alcoholism at the end of the fifties (Dittman, p. 98). Perhaps the most obvious common bond uniting Rimbaud and Kerouac is the central and almost unbearable tension between rebellion and authority that underpinned each man's life and work. The former is reflected in the constant restless search for the new in their work and life;<sup>3</sup> the latter in the more 'stable' Catholic morality embodied by their respective mothers. This tension also explains why Kerouac should have gravitated to the myth of Rimbaud as rebel artist, and yet also periodically sought to 'contain' that myth with reference to its more reassuring opposite: the myth of the Catholic convert. If we add to this mix Warren French's thesis about conflicted sexuality, then we can see that the self-identification thesis has considerable currency when it comes to reading Kerouac's poem.

If Kerouac's mythologisation of Rimbaud can be seen to emanate to a significant degree from his strong feeling of biographical kinship with the poet owing to certain similarities in family background and sexual orientation, his desire for self-identification is also, arguably, rooted in his recognition of a shared cultural experience: namely, that both he and Rimbaud were catapulted to the status of literary celebrity. Kerouac's publication of *On The Road* in 1957 transformed him from unknown writer into overnight sensation, someone who was suddenly heralded as a cultural icon at the very epicentre of the Beat Movement, and propelled to a level of fame and public exposure for which he was completely unprepared and towards which he remained deeply ambivalent right up until his premature death in 1969. As Jamie Russell, biographer of the Beats, aptly puts it:

*On The Road* was the literary event of the 1950s. The media were obsessed with the Beats. But rather than embracing this fame as the success he had been searching for, Kerouac found the attention wearing. Journalists and reporters descended on him, wanting his opinion on a range of issues, but rarely treating him as a serious writer. Drinking heavily, Kerouac tried to retreat from it all, buying a house for himself and his mother and giving her increasing power over his life... (Russell, p. 23)

Kerouac charted his increasingly sorry attempts to face up to his media and celebrity legend as 'King of the Beatniks' in *Big Sur* (1962), his moving autobiographical account of 'fame, (mis)fortune and alcoholism' (Russell, p. 30). Where other Beat writers, especially Ginsberg, positively embraced and thrived on the adulation they received from many of the countercultural figures of the 1960s such as Bob Dylan, who acknowledged their debt to the Beats as the original 'rebel artists', Kerouac refused, even resented, such associations.<sup>4</sup> And this is precisely the type of celebrity status that had earlier been foisted onto Rimbaud towards the end of his life, with the crucial difference that, unlike Kerouac, the poet himself was spared the full impact of his newfound role as cultural icon. The paradox emerges, therefore, that Kerouac mythologises

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<sup>2</sup> Reminiscing about his close friendship with Kerouac in 1990, Allen Ginsberg recalled his fellow writer's domineering mother, who would make him feel guilty for leaving home. See Ginsberg, 'Kerouac's Ethic' in *Un Homme Grand*, *op. cit.*; pp. 41-61.

<sup>3</sup> Kerouac's biographer, Gerald Nicosia, argues that in the mid-forties he, along with Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg, was consistently drawn to works that were 'critical of conventional ethics', and in particular, Rimbaud's famous imperative to be 'absolutely modern', p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> Where Ginsberg, for instance, met Bob Dylan at a house party in New York City in December 1963 and sought out the Beatles backstage at a Dylan gig in May 1965, the more reticent Kerouac 'would reject the whole premise of the 1960s counterculture'; see Simon Warner: *Text and Drugs and Rock'N' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 18.

Rimbaud in his poem, *despite* knowing full well, from his own ambivalent experiences, what the pitfalls of that celebrity status were. The poem was published in 1960, at the very height of his fame, only three years after *On The Road*. And yet, where Mallarmé had the courage and prescience to challenge and debunk this eulogisation, Kerouac merely colluded with it, displaying only a hint of disillusionment about the futility of artistic production at the very end of his poem.

Its opening line, the only one to be written in Rimbaud's native French, makes Kerouac's self-identification with his predecessor explicit from the outset, since it deliberately confuses his first name with that of the Frenchman: 'Arthur! On t'appela pas Jean!' Given that Kerouac was affectionately known as 'p'tit Jean', he is self-consciously presenting himself as Rimbaud's literary heir. At first, Kerouac appears to align Rimbaud, *pace* Miller, with the myth of the 'rebel poet'. Both Kerouac's language and that which he attributes to Rimbaud is subversive, scatological and hyperbolic ('Born in 1854 cursing in Charleville'), Rimbaud's rebelliousness and violent temperament being depicted as precursors to the destructiveness of the First World War ('thus paving the way for/the abominable murderousnesses of Ardennes-'). Kerouac makes ironic reference both to Rimbaud's intellectual precociousness and his father's abandonment of the family ('No wonder your father left!') and ('Proficient little Latinist you!'). And yet Kerouac also periodically invokes the very opposite myth propagated by Berrichon and later Claudel – that of the Catholic 'divine' Rimbaud- when he offsets his scatological, ironic language with a more spiritual and religious tone that presents Rimbaud as spiritually pure as well as morally corrupt: 'the miraculous Mexican brakeman/throws him off the fast/train to Heaven, which/he no longer travels because/Heaven is everywhere'. This reference to Heaven reflects Kerouac's likely identification in Rimbaud of the same tension between rebelliousness and Catholic morality that troubled him throughout his own life, even if the Beat poet did, of course, seek spiritual solace in Buddhism (Nicosia, pp. 494-5).

Warren's theory that Kerouac was projecting onto Rimbaud's relationship with Verlaine his *own* conflicted feelings about homosexuality is supported by Kerouac's depiction of older gay men as a corrupting influence on the young poet: 'Nevertheless the old fags intervene'. Even Rimbaud's much-debated presence in Paris at the time of the Commune is emphasised by Kerouac for its homosexual, rather than political significance. While it is true, for instance, that during this volatile period Rimbaud became briefly acquainted with the poet-cartoonist André Gill (see Robb, pp. 72-3), Kerouac exploits this biographical encounter to punningly associate Gill's name with the two famous gay writers André Gide and Jean Genet: 'André Gill was forerunner/to André Gide- Long walks reading poems/in the Genet haystacks-'. Moreover, speculation by biographers that Rimbaud may have been the victim of homosexual rape in the barracks of the Communard regiment he allegedly joined<sup>5</sup> is contradicted by Kerouac, who suggests that the young Arthur actively *sought out* gay sex ('hoping to be buggered'). Certainly, this corroborates the view of Verlaine's biographer Joanna Richardson (Richardson, p. 85). Either way, what emerges from Kerouac's lines, is a decidedly apolitical and homosexual Rimbaud who quite passively observes the violence of a besieged Paris in a way that does not remotely suggest any degree of political engagement:

-Cities are bombarded as/he stares & stares & chews/his degenerate lip & stares/with gray eyes at/Walled France-

In contrast to his mythologisation of Rimbaud in the rest of the poem, therefore, Kerouac's presentation of a 'scandalously' erotic Rimbaud whose role in the Commune is that of spectator rather than participant, serves to debunk, rather than reinforce, another Rimbaud myth that has most effectively been propagated by Marxist critic Kristin Ross: that he was a politically engaged and courageous

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<sup>5</sup> Steinmetz's speculation is based in part on his reading of Rimbaud's 1871 poem 'Le Cœur supplicie', Steinmetz, *op cit*, pp. 77-8.

supporter of the Paris Commune (Ross: 1988). Kerouac's 'depoliticisation' of Rimbaud has since been backed by Steinmetz, who argues that he joined the Communards purely out of economic and sexual opportunism, rather than political heroism (Steinmetz, pp. 74-6).

Extending the leitmotif of Rimbaud's notorious reputation from the barracks to the literary salon, Kerouac invokes the infamous episode when Rimbaud screamed 'Merde!' at the end of each line of a poetry recital he attended with Verlaine at a so-called 'Dîner des Vilains Bonshommes' in March 1872 by 'a justly forgotten poet called Auguste Creissels' whose 'Sonnet du combat' was, as Robb puts it: 'a pompous attempt at wit which evidently caused its author great satisfaction' (Robb, p.152)<sup>6</sup>. Kerouac's focus here clearly remains on Rimbaud's anti-social behaviour rather than his poetic activity, a behaviour that was also displayed in the constant tug-of-war between the young Arthur and Verlaine's long-suffering wife Mathilde for the affections of her husband, and incurred the stern disapproval of Rimbaud's domineering mother. Kerouac's account of the destructive impact wreaked by Rimbaud on the conventional family unit culminates in perhaps the most ironic line of the poem: 'Degenerate Arthur is suspected/ of being a poet by now'. More logically one would expect the line to read 'The poet Arthur was suspected of being degenerate by now.' It as if Kerouac self-consciously acknowledges the very myth to which he has himself succumbed: that of the rebel-artist whose controversial, unconventional life has overshadowed an appreciation of his poetry. Indeed, Kerouac makes only passing mention of Rimbaud's poetic activity ('Screaming in the barn/Rimbaud writes a Season in Hell'), before switching back to the dramatic episode of Verlaine firing the gun and his subsequent arrest. And yet Kerouac also tempers the myth of the rebel-artist with its morally redemptive opposite: he compares Rimbaud to the innocent Jesus in the light of Verlaine's shooting, the passive victim of the older poet, a shift in tone which supports Warren French's point about Kerouac's reservations about 'aggressive' male homosexuality: 'Rimbaud goes to the police/and presents his innocence/ like the pale innocence of his divine feminine Jesus'. Despite his subversive behaviour, Rimbaud here emerges as the wronged party, any sympathy felt towards Verlaine being undermined by Kerouac's flippant reference to his prison-term and the heartbreak this episode inflicted on him. 'Poor Verlaine, 2 years/in the can, but could have/got a knife in the heart.'

To summarise thus far: the first half of the poem is dominated by the myth of the rebel poet: the 'scandalous' homosexual whose controversial life overshadows his poetic output. At times, however, the opposite myth –that of the innocent, divine 'Catholic' Rimbaud- is invoked by Kerouac to reinforce the idea that Arthur was the passive, naive victim of Verlaine's aggressive and 'corrupting' male homosexuality.

The second half of the poem, which focuses primarily on Rimbaud's post-poetic life, presents a more proactive, liberated Arthur who becomes resolutely heterosexual once he has escaped Verlaine's clutches. In this regard, Kerouac takes the opposite view of those critics and the majority of Rimbaud's contemporaries who viewed the younger poet as the corrupter, rather than the corrupted. Henceforth, the poem adopts a less scatological and more emphatically upbeat tone that is in keeping with its portrayal of a more autonomous Rimbaud who enters adulthood, finally unshackled from his relationship with Verlaine. Kerouac implicitly overlays Rimbaud's transition from passivity to agency, constraint to freedom, and youth to maturity with his 'conversion' from homosexual to heterosexual. 'Illuminations! Stuttgart! Study of

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<sup>6</sup> This led to the infamous 'Carjat incident', when, following this intervention by Rimbaud, the poet-photographer Étienne Carjat called Rimbaud 'a little toad', whereupon Rimbaud allegedly lunged at him with Verlaine's swordstick, grazing his hand. According to other accounts Rimbaud is said to have stabbed Carjat after being evicted from the gathering. Though Carjat emerged unscathed, Rimbaud was subsequently banned from all 'Vilains Bonshommes' dinners (Robb, p. 152).



languages!/ On foot Rimbaud walks/ and looks thru the Alpine/passes into Italy, looking/for  
clover bells, rabbits, Genie Kingdoms.'

Kerouac's description alludes to the often naturalistic and magical lexicon used by Rimbaud in *Illuminations*, and even the otherwise dismissive critic Marjorie Perloff sees this passage as an indication that Kerouac had at least some familiarity with the Frenchman's poetry (Perloff, p. 6). But what emerges most of all here is the picture of a post-poetic Rimbaud whose focus and seriousness of purpose contrast markedly with the passivity and unruliness of his earlier Paris years. In a complete reversal of Yves Bonnefoy's refusal to discuss his African sojourn, Kerouac depicts Rimbaud the adventurer in a far more favourable light than he does his preceding years of literary productivity. This is partly because Kerouac falls into the clichéd trap of 'exoticising' Rimbaud's stay in Africa by employing an incantatory rhythm that contrasts with the distinctly more depressing Parisian scene in which the alcoholic Verlaine has remained:

- Havar,/Havar the magic trading/post – Aden, Aden,/South of Bedouin-  
/Ogaden,Ogaden never/known-(Meanwhile/Verlaine sits in Paris/over cognacs  
wondering/what Arthur looks like now,/ & how bleak their eyebrows/ because  
they believed in earlier eyebrow beauty)-.'

It is as if Kerouac, by placing him in parentheses as a pathetic alcoholic, wants to excise Verlaine from Rimbaud's life. Verlaine, by this stage, has come to be associated with an inhibiting and constraining homosexual lifestyle that held Rimbaud back during the Paris years that preceded his escape into the wider world. Rimbaud, by now, emerges as a more independent, serious and 'virile' young man who has gained the sense of purpose and adventure he was lacking before:

Rimbaud hit me over the head with that rock!/ Serious Rimbaud composes/  
elegant and learned articles/ for National Geographic/ Societies, & after wars/  
commands Harari girl (Ha Ha!) back to Abyssinia.

Here Kerouac alludes to Rimbaud's submission of learned articles to the respected journal *National Geographic* based on his supposed discovery of the highly dangerous and hitherto uncharted territories of Ougaden. Rimbaud's credentials as pioneering explorer of this region continues to divide even his most reliable biographers: Lefrère suggests that he was merely an 'explorateur par procuration', who adapted from a safe distance the notes of the *real* discoverer of the region, his Greek friend Konstantinu Sotiros (Lefrère, p. 867); whereas Graham Robb more generously credits Rimbaud both for his direct involvement in the exploration and his ground-breaking scholarly study of a strategically important territory at the height of the 'scramble for Africa' (Robb, pp.347-9)<sup>7</sup>. Wherever the truth may lie, Kerouac depicts the emergence of this 'serious' Rimbaud as coinciding with his acquisition of a female concubine, whom he intended to marry. This crucially touches upon another heated debate: namely, the extent to which Rimbaud renounced his earlier homosexuality. Lefrère, citing Rimbaud's friend Alfred Bardey's testimony that 'l'union' with his female companion 'fut intime' believes that he did (Lefrère, p. 897); a view that is supported by both Bonnefoy and Verlaine's biographer Joanna Richardson, who go so far as to suggest that Rimbaud's 'gay life' had been but a passing phase that was exploratory and experimental in nature.<sup>8</sup> While there is no question that he did live with a young Abyssinian woman who was allegedly called Mariam, from 1884 to 1886, other

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<sup>7</sup> Robb writes, 'his report on the Ogaden was the first authoritative account of one of the world's largest remaining unexplored regions'; *op cit*; p. 348

<sup>8</sup> Richardson rather schematically suggests that 'He himself [Verlaine] satisfied his appetites as a hedonist; Rimbaud did so as an explorer.' (pp. 76-7); whereas Bonnefoy is even more categorical in his assertion that Rimbaud came to view his youthful homosexuality as 'la catastrophe de l'autre amour' which 'demeure à ses yeux une passion négative, une privation, un échec' (p.153).

critics such as Benjamin Ivry, who passionately uphold Rimbaud as a gay icon, in no way see this as evidence of a belated conversion to a heterosexual existence. Ivry maintains that the woman ‘appears to have been more an employee than a companion’ and that if Rimbaud did have a lover while in Africa then it is more likely to have been his loyal man-servant Djami Wadaï (Ivry, p. 89).<sup>9</sup> In aligning himself with those, such as Bonnefoy, who prefer to see the later African Rimbaud as ‘cured’ of his earlier homosexuality, Kerouac provides further confirmation of Warren French’s theory that he had conflicted feelings about his *own* sexuality. The Beat author’s unequivocal depiction of Rimbaud’s transition from a repressive homosexuality into a more liberating heteronormative life is reflected in his alleged encounter with ‘thinbonehipped Polynesians/ with long tumbling hair &/tiny tits and big feet.’ There is no biographical evidence of Rimbaud ever having known such women, but this is not Kerouac’s primary concern: rather, he wishes to people Rimbaud’s later life with sexualised female partners, irrespective of whether these women in fact existed or not.

The final section of the poem refers to Rimbaud’s notorious and lucrative gun-trading and the much debated debacle of his encounter with Menelek, King of the Abyssinians. Rimbaud found himself owing money to Menelek for an arms deal he had undertaken with his trading partner Labatut, who suddenly and unexpectedly died of throat cancer, leaving Rimbaud accountable for his unpaid debts. Starkie’s account, no doubt influenced by her generally dismissive opinion of Rimbaud’s talents as a businessman, vindicates Kerouac’s belief that Rimbaud was ‘Screwed by King Menelek’<sup>10</sup>; whereas Robb (pp. 381-2) and Lefrère (p.1005) have more recently argued that, given its complexity, Rimbaud extricated himself from this predicament with considerable skill and at a relative profit.

The final section of the poem poignantly recounts Rimbaud’s final journey back to Marseille and the unsuccessful amputation of his leg following his diagnosis of cancer. ‘– Carcinoma, Rimbaud/ is eaten by the disease/of overlife- They cut off/ his beautiful leg-’. In referring to the ‘disease of overlife’ Kerouac turns the cancer into a metaphor for Rimbaud’s short but intense life, suggesting someone who had lived life too fully. The poem ends on an equivocal, anti-climactic note, which conveys a more dispiriting sense of the general futility of artistic production, no matter how illustrious the artist or eventful his life: ‘& it all adds up to nothing, like/Dostoevsky, Beethoven/or Da Vinci-’. The final lines, therefore, appear to sound a warning to poets about the ultimate pointlessness of their craft:

So, poets, rest awhile/& shut up:/Nothing ever came/of nothing.

Is there already a hint here, of Kerouac’s own disillusionment with fame, barely three years after the publication of *On The Road*?

### **Mallarmé: debunking the Rimbaud myth**

Despite its downbeat ending, which perhaps offers the merest indication of his growing disenchantment with celebrity, Kerouac’s homage to Rimbaud takes the form of an exuberant self-identification that exhibits all the hallmarks of Étiemble’s first category of Rimbaud myth: hyperbolic, erroneous and biased. If, as I have argued, the immediate catalyst for this self-identification is likely to have been certain obvious biographical similarities between the two men (a rebellious thirst for freedom that signals a love-hate relationship with the Catholic authority of a domineering mother), then it also found fertile ground in the pre-existing myths of the rebel artist and the Catholic convert. The opportunity to pose any kind of credible challenge to

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<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Ivry, Kerouac emphasises the exclusively loyal, rather than sexual, bond that existed between Rimbaud and his servant: ‘[Rimbaud] sends his francs to Djami, Djami the Havari boy/his dody servant.’

<sup>10</sup> ‘There seems to be no doubt that Rimbaud was cheated and robbed in Shoa...It is certain that he came out of the transaction worse than he need,’ Enid Starkie, *Arthur Rimbaud* (pp. 315-16)

another, later myth, and a variant of the rebel artist – that of Rimbaud as gay icon – is squandered by Kerouac's reductively hetero-normative view, which, as Warren French has shown, is essentially a projection of his own conflicted sexuality.

By contrast, Mallarmé's more circumspect and nuanced prose piece on Rimbaud avoids the mythologizing pitfalls identified by Étiemble because it adopts a very deliberate strategy of self-distancing, rather than self-identification. Where Kerouac ignores or manipulates facts to reinforce his own feeling of kinship with the rebel poet, Mallarmé is at pains to emphasise from the outset that his personal connection to Rimbaud is practically non-existent and that many of the so-called 'facts' he does convey about the poet are second-hand and open to conjecture. Where Kerouac fails to quote any sources for his 'versified biography' of Rimbaud, Mallarmé scrupulously acknowledges his debt, where relevant, to the written accounts of Rimbaud's childhood friend Delahaye as well as – perhaps ironically, given his mythologisation of Rimbaud, to the often unreliable Berrichon (*AR*, p. 69). A brief degree of contextualisation is required to explain Mallarmé's more scrupulously cautious approach. To begin with, contrary to his homages to Villiers and Verlaine, his portrait of Rimbaud was inspired neither by friendship nor a sense of personal kinship: it was specifically commissioned by Harrison Rhodes, American editor of the Chicago publication *The Chapbook*. As Mallarmé makes abundantly clear early on in the text, 'I did not know him [Rimbaud], but I saw him once' (*AR*, p. 65). This emphasis on what effectively amounts to his non-meeting with Rimbaud is crucial in allowing Mallarmé the objective critical distance he requires to disentangle his fellow poet from the myth that surrounded him.

This critical distance was no doubt further facilitated by the significant biographical and poetic differences, rather than similarities, between the two men. Where Kerouac and Rimbaud's lives, as we have seen, abound with biographical and literary coincidences, Mallarmé was in a sense the very *antithesis* of Rimbaud. If Rimbaud had to deal with an overbearing mother till the end of his life, Mallarmé lost his aged only five (Pearson, p. 18) leading to a rather solitary childhood. Where Rimbaud's life and work are often steeped in scandalously anti-bourgeois behaviour, hyperbole and invective, Mallarmé was the very epitome of urbane middle-class respectability, his poetry characterised by delicate understatement and preciousness. Contrary to the precocious and daring Rimbaud, his journey to fame was slow, painstaking and boringly conventional: descended, by his own admission, from a long line of functionaries, educated at a prestigious Parisian lycée, he toiled away for years as a school-teacher before finally securing poetic recognition with his publication of 'l'Après-midi d'un faune' in 1876. Far from being the uncouth, untutored farm-boy from the Ardennes who took Paris by storm with his sonnet 'Les Voyelles', only swiftly to abandon poetry to embrace the Spartan life of an adventurer in dangerously uncharted territories in East Africa, Mallarmé devoted his entire adult life to writing the ultimate poetic work, alternating between his creature comforts in his apartment at the rue de Rome which hosted his famous 'mardis', and his peaceful country retreat in Valvins where he regularly entertained literary disciples such as Paul Valéry. Rimbaud's wanderlust contrasts with Mallarmé's staid domesticity, since he rarely ventured outside his comfort zone, save for a few trips to England. Mallarmé himself self-deprecatingly alludes to his rather boringly 'respectable' existence and background in his carefully crafted autobiographical letter to Verlaine.<sup>11</sup>

If Kerouac can be aligned with the Rimbaud 'mythologisers' who allow the life to overshadow the poetry, Mallarmé redresses the imbalance: his article initially withholds biographical information about Rimbaud to place the onus on what he believes risks being forgotten: the work: 'Maybe you want to know what the person was like: but at least we have the

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<sup>11</sup> See Pearson for a succinct account of Mallarmé's letter which, self-deprecation aside, also deliberately stresses his 'writerly' origins: his penpushing ancestors in the *Enregistrement* and an official in the censorship department under Louis XVI, *op cit*; pp. 127-9.

published works – *Une saison en enfer*, *Illuminations* and the volume *Poèmes* published long ago.’<sup>12</sup> Even Rimbaud’s relationship with Verlaine, which is presented by Kerouac in overtly sexual terms, is initially introduced by Mallarmé as a fruitful literary partnership. Mallarmé is alive to the fact that any objective evaluation of Rimbaud demands a more balanced assessment of the relationship between his life and poetry, the latter needing to emerge from beneath the shadow cast by the former, even if he recognises the singular importance of Rimbaud’s life.

Like Kerouac, Mallarmé debunks the myth of Rimbaud as the politically committed participant in the Paris Commune. Except that, whereas Kerouac provocatively sexualises the Commune episode (‘hoping to be buggered’), Mallarmé more pointedly suggests that the young Rimbaud somewhat deceptively ‘passed himself off as an independent sniper for the Commune fallen on hard times’, as a result of which, ‘his companions hastened to take up a collection for his benefit’ (*AR*, p. 67). As noted above, this account of Rimbaud’s opportunistic involvement in the Commune has since been backed by his more recent biographer, Jean-Luc Steinmetz. Mallarmé is seeking not so much to denigrate Rimbaud’s reputation, as gently puncture the exaggerated myths that surround him in order to re-orientate overinflated perceptions of the rebel poet back towards an objective evaluation of his poetry. Indeed, in the following sentence he re-emphasises Rimbaud’s greater commitment to literature than to the politics of the Commune: ‘These are small, miscellaneous details, quite suited, in fact, to one who was violently ravaged by literature; the worst of all perturbations after his having spent many long, slow, studious hours on benches or in libraries’, (*AR*, p. 67).

The powerful phrase ‘ravaged by literature’ forms a telling contrast with Kerouac’s ‘hoping to be buggered’ as it suggests, in erotic terms, that the key impact on Rimbaud was literature itself rather than any outside human agency, whether sexual or political. Once again it is Rimbaud the poet, as opposed to Rimbaud the notorious homosexual or political rebel, to which Mallarmé wishes to draw the attention of his readers.

Mallarmé’s re-balancing of Rimbaud criticism from an excessive focus on his sexual and political identity or exploits to his serious literary commitment, is, however, further tempered by a relatively muted assessment of his poetic originality. Mallarmé recognises that Rimbaud ‘burst on the poetic scene like a meteor’ and that ‘his most magical effects’ are ‘produced by the opposition between a world before the Parnassians – even before the Romantics- or very classical, and the sumptuous disorder of a passion about which one could say nothing except that it was spiritually exotic’; but he does not see Rimbaud as one of the innovators behind free verse, nor does he believe that Rimbaud’s ‘search for “new sensations,” he insisted, “not known” was quite as successful as he claimed. ‘He flattered himself that they [the sensations] could be found in the bazaar of illusions vulgarly known as big cities; in which the demon adolescent did discover, one evening, a grandiose vision, prolonged by drunkenness alone’ (*AR*, p.67).

Sceptics might interpret this as a slightly envious older poet putting a younger rival in his place with a barbed reference to his drunkenness, as well as to over-exaggerated claims about his poetic discoveries. Such a view would also be backed by Mallarmé’s recollection of Rimbaud’s ‘sardonic mouth, with its pouting and mocking expression’ (*AR*, p. 65). Moreover, as Pearson notes (Pearson, p.180) it is no secret that Verlaine, rather than Rimbaud, was Mallarmé’s favourite contemporary poet (they were also close friends) and that, given the polarisation of opinion prompted by the infamous shooting episode discussed above, this personal bias towards the older poet might have negatively influenced his judgement of the younger one. But such a view is neither consistent with Mallarmé’s genuinely enthusiastic and lengthy quotation, early on in his article, of Rimbaud’s ‘beautiful poems’, nor of his recognition of the indelible mark his life left behind (‘beautiful passage’). His reservations more plausibly reflect a desire to reintroduce a

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<sup>12</sup> Reference to Mallarmé’s 1896 article ‘Arthur Rimbaud’ (henceforth included in the text as *AR*) is based on Barbara Johnson’s English translation: *Stéphane Mallarmé, ‘Divagations’* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 64-72.

degree of objectivity into evaluations of Rimbaud, an objectivity that resists hyperbolic mythologizing. It would be hasty, therefore, as the critic Henri Mondor did in the 1940s, to seize upon Mallarmé's relatively minor criticisms as an authoritative basis for attacking what he saw as Rimbaud's derivative and unoriginal style:

Autant les grandes beautés, non sans apparence ou nasarde d'incohérence, éblouissent, presque à chaque alinéa, dans *Une Saison en enfer* et *les Illuminations*, autant, dans les vers qui les précèdent, je me risque à le redire, le bâcle et l'emprunt nuisent souvent à l'excellent. (Mondor, p. 28)

Whatever personally motivated misgivings Mallarmé may have had about Rimbaud are more than compensated for by his overriding sense of responsibility for the objective truth. He is especially keen to denounce the role of newspapers and the media in their fabrication and spreading of completely unsubstantiated myths about the poet. He warns that newspapers and caricaturists (including personal acquaintances Félix Fénéon and Anatole France) have been complicit in this myth-making, most notably the ludicrous but popular story that circulated in literary journals and drawings between 1886 and 1888 that Rimbaud had become the 'roi des nègres' (Lefrère, pp. 1028-9):

Cheap anecdotes are not lacking around someone who had lost the thread of his existence; they fell naturally into the newspapers. What purpose would it serve to recycle these stories and string them together like pieces of coloured glass? Fit to be worn round the neck of some Negro king, as caricaturists would later laughingly represent him, a poet lost in an unknown tribe. (*AR*, p. 67)

Mallarmé makes one notable concession to anecdotes about Rimbaud, and this because of its exclusively literary nature, which reveals much about the creative mindset of the poet: the amusing episode recounted to him by the older Parnassian poet Banville – known for his generosity to younger writers-, who gave Rimbaud lodgings in his respectable bourgeois home in the rue de Buci, with a view to helping him write:

The goodness of that Master was palpable. We went to him right away. One of our own needed the conditions, we explained in some sort of jargon, to make *great art*. (*AR*, p. 68)

Contrary to the cheap newspaper anecdotes, this vignette is chosen by Mallarmé as an illustrative example of Rimbaud's unique approach to poetry: his anti-bourgeois rebelliousness is reflected in his refusal to work methodically in a respectable bourgeois environment; the generation gap between him and the Parnassians is accentuated by the contrast between Banville the 'methodical donor' and the unruly young man. But subtly too, Mallarmé interweaves into this amusing vignette some of his *own* poetic tropes and concerns: the reference to the 'clean, virginal' room with its white bed-sheets recalls Mallarmé's own poetic obsession with virginal whiteness as a metaphor for sterility and purity; and the reference to Rimbaud's clothes 'going down with the last rays of the sun' and his 'mythological garment' is a nod to Mallarmé's concern with the so-called 'drame solaire', inspired by mythologist Max Müller, which sees the diurnal rhythm of the sun as a symbol of the life and death that punctuates the human condition. Mallarmé, in other words, exploits humour not only to crystallise in his reader's mind a more accurate image of Rimbaud as poet, but also to differentiate himself from that image. Self-distancing is also a subtle means of self-positioning and self-analysis: by evaluating the poetic concerns of his peers, Mallarmé was invariably sharpening his own. His critical engagement with Rimbaud is thus more self-reflective than Kerouac's often indiscriminating self-identification.

And yet for all his emphasis on Rimbaud's poetry and literary ambitions, Mallarmé, contrary to Starkie and Bonnefoy, resists the obvious temptation to dismiss his post-poetic life as

an aberration and abject failure, nor does he presume, as they do, to offer the definitive interpretation as to why he gave up literature and to chastise him for doing so ('one can say that nothing enables us to decipher him – alone after this tragic incident- in his ultimate crisis, which interests us because he ceased everything literary: friends and works', *AR*, p. 69). He more subtly and modestly suggests that Rimbaud 'rejected dreams- through his fault or theirs' and 'amputated from himself, wide awake, all trace of poetry, finding, perhaps, far away, very far away, a new state of being', *AR*, p. 69. Far from blaming Rimbaud for abandoning literature, he suggests with devastating simplicity that his psychological state demanded a change of scene. The real amputation of Rimbaud's leg in a Marseille hospital that was ultimately to cause his death is here reactivated by Mallarmé as a powerful metaphor to signal his severing off of all contact with literature.

Mallarmé resists not only Starkie and Bonnefoys's judgemental indictments of Rimbaud's post-poetic life, but also Kerouac's equally reductive approach, which is to 'exoticise' this phase of his existence as one long adventure, punctuated by heterosexual erotic conquests and occasional moments of scholarly productivity. We have seen how The Beat author cannot resist 'exoticising' Rimbaud's peripatetic sojourn in Java and then Africa, with his rhythmic repetition of 'Harar' and 'Aden' and his references to 'thin hip boned Polynesians'. Mallarmé, on the contrary, anticipating Edward Saïd's denunciation of one-dimensional views of the Orient that reflect the dominant male fantasies of the Western literary imagination, more soberly depicts Rimbaud's sojourn in Africa as a hard-nosed commercial venture:

His tropical escapades had perhaps less to do with the marvellous or sumptuous settings, since it's as a soldier hawking his wares that he shows up in 1876, among the Dutch military heading for Sumatra. (*AR*, p. 70)

In fact, Mallarmé further debunks the Orientalism of which his country and century were often guilty, by raising the thorny question of Rimbaud's alleged involvement in the slave trade:

...after a few weeks he deserts again and boards, at the cost of his travel bonus, an English ship, before becoming, audaciously, a slave-trader in his turn, amassing a fortune he loses in Denmark or Sweden, from which he is again repatriated: he becomes Director of Marble quarries in Cyprus on 1879, after a stint in Egypt, in Alexandria, and elsewhere – and he spends the rest of his days "trafficking". (*AR*, p.70)

Though officially banned by King Menelek of Shoah, this abhorrent practice was silently tolerated by him so as not to antagonise the Abou Bekr, the powerful Arab slave-trading family that controlled the arms route on which the prosperity of Menelek's kingdom and that of many European tradesmen, including Rimbaud, depended. If Rimbaud was gratuitously labelled as a slave-trader by enemies such as Lepelletier in the *Écho de Paris* just after he died in 1891 (Lefrère, p.1084), Enid Starkie was the first critic to investigate this accusation properly in the 1930s. Space forbids a detailed examination of the evidence, which continues to divide critics to this day, but suffice it to say that Rimbaud cannot completely be let off the hook. The most plausible view is that at best, like most traders in the region, he cynically turned a blind eye to this practice in order to protect his own commercial interests, and that at worst, he owned a few slaves, but did not actively trade in them himself. Lefrère concludes that while it is unquestionable that Rimbaud explicitly requested the purchase of two slaves in a letter to his friend the Swiss engineer Ilg (who was advisor to King Menelek) he 'ne fut pas plus marchand d'esclaves qu'il ne fut pilleur d'épaves au cap Garduifi' (Lefrère, p. 1085). Wherever the precise truth may lie, Mallarmé's passing reference to Rimbaud's alleged involvement in human trafficking can be seen as part of a broader strategy to puncture the eulogising 'myths' that surround him, myths that

impede not only an objective evaluation of his poetry, but also of his personality, which, like everyone else's was flawed and all too human.

Further evidence of Mallarmé's 'demythologising' approach is his warning against the temptation to 'fill in the gaps' of Rimbaud's life based purely on fragmentary knowledge, supposition and fantasy:

I know, at least, the gratuitousness of putting oneself in the place of someone else's mind: this one, in any case, must have spoken a lot when he was alone. To organize the fragments of someone else's life into intelligible and probable parts, in order to translate the whole into a story: what impertinence! All I can do is push to the limit this kind of misdeed. (*AR*, pp. 70-71)

Mallarmé is at pains to stress that any biographical information he divulges about Rimbaud is based exclusively on the evidence available to him, such as the memoirs of Rimbaud's school friend Delahaye, which affectionately recall his taciturn responses to questions about his attitudes to literature and Verlaine. That some of this 'evidence' was garnered from Berrichon's account is, of course, in itself problematic, but Mallarmé is at least scrupulous enough to recognise the *limits* of his knowledge of Rimbaud, limits which were all too frequently ignored by the Rimbaud 'mythologisers' who claimed to know better.

Mallarmé also subtly warns his readers against nurturing the fantasy that there were some hidden and unpublished Rimbaud poems waiting to see the light of day. He resists the compulsion, shared by Starkie and others, to speculate on what 'what might have been', a speculation that is based on the assumption that Rimbaud could, and should, have achieved so much more than he did, if only he had not squandered his considerable talents by abandoning poetry so young. Those who feel disappointed and frustrated at Rimbaud, Mallarmé suggests, are missing the point: his precociousness always meant that his literary career would be short-lived, because he lived his life with a particular intensity that was unsustainable in the long-term:

I feel, however, that prolonging the hope of a mature work is harmful, here, toward the exact interpretation of a unique adventure in the history of art. That of a child too precociously and peremptorily touched by the wings of literature, who, barely having had time to live, used up its stormy and magisterial destiny, without recourse to any possible future. (*AR*, p.71)

Mallarmé's exhortation to his readers to accept Rimbaud on his own terms, rather than according to the expectations, dashed hopes or fantasies of his admirers contrasts, for instance, with novelist Henry Miller, whose eulogisation of the poet is so great that he imagines that Rimbaud's period in Africa was a necessary phase in his life that would have allowed him to make a triumphant return to literature, or at least to some mystical state of plenitude:

One wonders, had he come back *in this life*, what sort of poetry he would have written, what his message would have been. It was as though, cut off in the prime of manhood, he was cheated of that final phase of development which permits a man to harmonize his warring selves...

We see him expiring as a defeated man; we have no perception of the rewards which his years of worldly experience were storing up for him. We see two opposite types of being united in one man; we see the conflict but not the potential harmony or resolution. (Miller, p. 45)

## Celebrity culture

In the end, Mallarmé was perceptive enough to recognise that, even in his own lifetime, Rimbaud was already becoming the reluctant witness to the emergence of a mythologised version of himself that no longer bore any relation to the person he actually was:

However, one must, squeezing the hypothesis until it yields up the eventual beauty of this glorious career, after all, without compromise – with anarchy or intellectually- presume that the person concerned would have greeted the news of his fame with icy disdain, as concerning someone who had indeed been him, certainly, but was in no way him now (AR, p.72)

Certainly, his respectful acknowledgement of Rimbaud's reluctance to exploit his fame is supported by the fact that he spurned all belated attempts, notably by the journalist Paul Bourde who tracked him down in Aden in April 1884 (Robb, pp. 352-3), to lure him back into the literary circles that now revered him. Robb argues that Rimbaud's shunning of literary celebrity stemmed more from fear of malicious gossip about his past with Verlaine than shame about his writing. And this fear, Robb maintains, was predominantly commercially motivated: 'Rumours of depravity would not be good for business' (Robb, p. 353). Mallarmé appears to share Robb's opinion of Rimbaud's hard-nosed, commercial approach to life, but in a gently mocking and light-hearted tone: he speculates that the only circumstances in which Rimbaud *might* have exploited his literary fame, would be to claim the profit he was owed from his books:

Unless the impersonal phantom pushed his lack of literary interest as far as to demand, crossing Paris, to add to the wealth he had brought back with him, his royalties. (AR, p.72)

Be that as it may, the ironic conclusion to Mallarmé's critique of Rimbaud should not detract from its serious sociological ramifications, which extend well beyond his study of this particular poet. For however unique his life may have been, Rimbaud's ambivalent relationship to fame (as Robb puts it, he was 'uncomfortably ambiguous about his exposure', p. 353) uncannily anticipates in a more general sense the increasingly problematic disjuncture in twenty-first century society between how the public perceive a well-known person and what that person feels and experiences in reality. Mallarmé's article, in other words, presciently prefigures the now much-maligned phenomenon of a 'celebrity culture' in which celebrities no longer have ownership of who they are because their image and reputation, irrespective of the truth, is determined by outside agencies such as the media that are beyond their control. Sociologist Nathalie Heinich has aptly referred to the phenomenon of artistic or literary celebrity as the 'van Gogh effect', based on her magisterial study of the deeply troubled late nineteenth-century Dutch painter, whose posthumous reputation has taken on an entire life of its own as that of a virtual saint, the 'founding myth of the accursed artist' whose 'degeneration in the present proves his future greatness' (Heinich, p. 140). Heinich convincingly charts six stages in Van Gogh's trajectory from unrecognised, misunderstood artist to globally celebrated genius: 'his work was made into an enigma, his life into a legend, his fate into a scandal, his paintings were put for sale and exhibited, and the places he went, as well as the objects he touched, were made into relics' (Heinich, p. 140). That the respective and, frankly, unremarkable birthplaces of Kerouac and Rimbaud - Lowell Massachusetts, and Roche, in north-eastern France – continue to attract large numbers of devotees bears testimony to their own, similarly eventful journeys from 'biography to hagiography.' The crucial difference, however, as I have already suggested, is that contrary to the French poet and the Dutch painter, Kerouac bore the full brunt of his fame *during* his lifetime, rather than posthumously. Rimbaud's otherwise tragic early death largely spared him this experience, an experience which, as Mallarmé intelligently speculates, he is likely to have regarded with the same consternation and disdain as Kerouac. In conclusion, then, it is difficult



to disagree with Wallace Fowlie's glowing assessment of Mallarmé's remarkably insightful article on Rimbaud and the important socio-cultural phenomenon he has come to embody:

These pages of Mallarmé, written in April 1896, five years after Rimbaud's death, are the most penetrating and the loftiest of all such tributes to the man who walked from city to city, from country to country, in search of an absolute or a happiness which he never found. (Fowlie, pp. 38-9)

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